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VIRTUALITY AND RUMORS OF REALITY: THE HUMANIST IN AN INTERACTIVE AGE

BY DOLAN HUBBARD

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One time dere was a man what was a farmer. One year he had a real good crop. But dis man was kinda lazy, and when it come time to gather de crop he tole ole lady dat he could not he'p gather de crop cause he fel de Lord was callin' him to go preach. He tole her to look up in de sky, and he pointed out de letters G P C, which he say meant, "Go Preach Christ" and he had to go.

But de ole lady she was too much fer him. "Dose letters don' mean, 'Go Preach Christ,'" she said. "Dey mean, 'Go Pick Cotton.'"¹

Cotton was a powerful stimulant to slavery; the two seemed to have been made for each other. In many ways, cotton lent itself to slave labor. A person working in a cotton field did not have to be highly motivated. Along with

¹ Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, eds., "The Farmer and G.P.C.," *The Book of Negro Folklore* (1958; New York: Dodd, Mead, 1983) 139-40.

the bag to hold the picked cotton, the hoe and the plow were the basic tools. None of the operations were sufficiently complex to require that a cotton picker keep his mind on his work.²

If we are not careful, many of us will be doing the electronic equivalent of "Go Pick Cotton." We will be sent in search of the technological golden fleece by virtual evangelists who promise us the electronic millennium and invite us to play in their virtual field of dreams. With the nineteenth century in our rearview mirror and the twenty-first century in our headlights, Secretary of Labor Robert Reich reminds us that it will take a different kind of driver just to drive to the pearly gates that enclose those dreams. "Once the path to the middle class," he notes, "used to be based on production; now it is based on technology."³ The key to upward mobility and entry into the middle class in the twenty-first century will be based on how technologically literate one is and how well one can surf the Internet and navigate in its cyberspace. Those who cannot move beyond their learner's permit will be assigned by the electronic mercantilists to work in their electronic cotton fields. Dreams and rumors of dreams, or maybe nightmares!

We are on the precipice of a paradigm shift in how information is packaged, delivered, and retrieved. The new world order is defined by the microchip. The edict is to master the microchip and master the world. According to George Gilder, "The integrated circuit, or microchip, gave the world the capability to combine many transistors on one tiny piece of silicon."⁴ Francis Bacon told us that

² Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Making of America* (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1969) 63.

³ Interview with Lou Dobbs, *Moneyline*, CNN, Atlanta, 28 March 1995.

⁴ George Gilder, *Life after Television: The Coming Transformation of Media and American Life* (New York: Norton, 1994) 42. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text. In the past, Gilder, a largely self-taught economist and social philosopher, incurred the wrath of feminists for his works on social theory—such as *Sexual Suicide* (1973).

“Knowledge . . . is power.”⁵ The paradox is that never has so much information been available; yet never has so much information been controlled by so few. The interconnected terms—information highway, cyberspace, digital universe—are metaphors for the privatization of information, the most prized commodity in the twenty-first century. Information will be bought and sold just as one would buy and sell a pair of Air Jordans.

With an unwavering faith, the supply-side economist and futurist George Gilder in *Life after Television* boldly prophesies that the “television age is giving way to the much richer, interactive technologies of the computer age” (37). The symbol for the emerging information age is the “teleputer,” a blend of the telephone and computer:

Teleputers have interactive powers, from voice-controlled video to image creation and retrieval, that are inherently impossible in an analog broadcast medium (45-46). [These] super-smart telecomputers, or “teleputers” . . . will be capable of summoning or sending films or files, news stories and clips, courses and catalogs anywhere in the world. Whether offering 500 channels or thousands, TV will be irrelevant in a world without channels, where [one] can always order exactly what [one wants when one wants it], and where every terminal commands the communications power of a broadcast station today. (21)

The present revolution in technology will add another dimension to Macbeth’s question that has interrogated us across the ages: “Who has murdered sleep?” (II.ii.31-43).⁶ Technology has murdered sleep! We will enter a world in which technology will make it impossible for us to be a Robinson Crusoe or to be home alone. We will always be in contact with our offices via fax, call waiting, call forwarding, voice mail, and E-mail. It is not too far-fetched to say that

⁵ Francis Bacon, “Of Heresies,” *Works*, ed. James Spedding, rev. ed., vol. 7 (Longman, 1872) 252-54. In an address at the University of California, Berkeley, President John Fitzgerald Kennedy observed that “in a time of turbulence and change, it is more true than ever that knowledge is power” (23 March 1962).

⁶ William Shakespeare, *Works*, ed. Alfred Harbage (New York: Viking, 1969) 1117.

the world will be our office, metaphorized as “the World Wide Web.”

The evaporation of time creates its own paradox. Surrounded by a vast array of communication gadgets, people will feel an overwhelming sense of isolation that is generated by the higher expectation for productivity in a desacralized world where the meaning of meaning might be meaningless. Commenting on the conversion of information into digital form, Gilder observes that a “huge variety of programs could be dispatched over fiber lines. A small box of disks by the desk could hold whole libraries of pay-per-view video entertainment, art, and information. High-quality, full-motion video no longer needs to be broadcast through the air or through copper cable” (44).

Suffering from a techno-overload, some virtual warriors will identify with the stressed-out protagonist on Marvin Gaye’s classic record “Inner City Blues,” who, fed up with the temper of his time, proclaimed, “Oh, make me want to holler and throw up both of my hands.”⁷ Decentered spiritually and overwhelmed by the turn-around time in a digital universe, many people will suffer from a bad case of the virtual-reality blues. Seemingly, computers will pass on their viruses to their users. As humanists, we must heed the words of literary critic Sven Birkerts, who asserts, “All of the old assumptions are being transformed by information technologies.”⁸

The interactive age is changing and therefore is redefining the traditional role of the humanist in a post-industrial world. Its implications for us as teachers of the humanities and the impact on our communities in this brave New World are frightening to some and fosters boldness in

⁷ Marvin Gaye, “Inner City Blues (Makes Me Wanna Holler),” *What’s Going On?* (Detroit: Motown Records, 1971).

⁸ Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994) 6. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text. Also, see Diane Ravitch, “When School Comes to You,” *The Economist* 11-17 Sept. 1993: 45-46, 51.

others. As our role is being redefined, we need to rethink our relationship with the academy and enter into a new covenant, a new partnership.

With its origins in the scholarship of the Italian humanists, humanism has come to mean any philosophy which recognizes the value and dignity of people, which makes them the measure of all things, or which somehow takes as its theme human nature, its limits, or its interests. Humanism is concerned with moral problems, with its concern for human beings, their interests, themes, and social organizations. Humanists are ultimately concerned about mankind's moral and spiritual salvation. In a virtual world, the computer chip promotes ethical invisibility where we cannot identify anyone who is accountable for errors of commission and of omission.⁹

As humanists, we must look at the dialectic between human beings and technology. I refer to this as the poetry and prose of the new technology. Poetry speaks to those wonderful, creative, and imaginative moments which cyberspace promises us; prose speaks to our ability to decode its grammar. We must examine the implication of cyberspace for us as teachers and for those in our undeserved communities. Is cyberspace user-friendly? Does it take into account the issues of access and equity? Will the new technologies of the interactive age stifle intuition as the source of philosophical truth? Will they reverse the centuries-old tendency to look within ourselves (as opposed to external sources) for happiness and inner peace? Salvation through technology will not save us, will not satiate us. Its protean nature precludes our capturing it and denies us any sense of security in mastery. Always there is new territory to con-

⁹ Chester J. Fontenot, Jr., "Angelic Dance or Tug of War? The Humanistic Implications of Cultural Formalism," *Black American Literature and Humanism*, ed. R. Baxter Miller (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1981) 33-49; Richard K. Barksdale, *Praisesong of Survival: Lectures and Essays, 1957-89* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1992) 44, 54; Also, see Paul Kurtz, *Toward a New Enlightenment*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and Timothy J. Madigan (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1994).

quer in cyberspace.

The aesthetics of cyberspace will affect how we construct knowledge. We see the effect of the interactive age on the *ideology of form*, that is, how we send, receive, and retrieve information.¹⁰ Birkerts provides us with a detailed description of the radical change that we can expect as we move from a print medium (analog) to a visual medium (digital):

As the printed book, and the ways of the book—of writing and reading—are modified, as electronic communications assert dominance, the “feel” of the literary engagement is altered. Reading and writing come to *mean* differently; they acquire new significations. As the world hurtles on toward its mysterious rendezvous, the old act of slowly reading a serious book becomes an elegiac exercise. As we ponder that act, profound questions must arise about our avowedly humanistic values, about spiritual versus material concerns [about race, gender, cyberspace], and about subjectivity itself. (6)¹¹

Three things may be deduced from Birkerts’ meditation on the electronic future. First, reading is rescripted as a symbol of hyperluxury. Why read when information can be gotten on demand with the push of a button? Second, the vast army of the underread—the electronically untouchables—will pose a security threat to the welfare of the nation-state. They must feel that they have a future in the future. (The reference public in works by writers such as Birkerts and Gilder is middle-class and college educated. Birkerts gives the distinct impression that the intellectual classes are in danger of being overrun by barbarians at the gate.) Third, and paradoxically, the nation-state itself is an anachronism in a world without borders. Electronic commerce leapfrogs across national boundaries, outstripping

¹⁰ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1981).

¹¹ Erskine Peters, *African Americans in the New Millennium: Blueprinting the Future* (Berkeley: Regent P, 1992); Roger Cook and Shirley A. Hudson, “Plugging Minority Students into the Information Age,” *Black Issues in Higher Education* 13 Aug. 1992: 48; and Walter E. Massey, “Science, Technology, and Human Resources: Preparation for the Twenty-First Century,” *The State of Black America 1992* (New York: National Urban League, 1992) 157-69.

the slow deliberations of politicians. Humanists will be needed more than ever to make sense of the "future shock" and to probe the environment for the meaning of the message and the message of the medium.¹²

As humanists, we need to know what is the place of reading and sensibility in what is becoming an electronic culture. We must teach our students to discern between information and knowledge; between abundance, variety, and quality. In the 500-channel world of CATV, we will have an abundance of channels, but will we have a variety of information sources and a diversity of commentary? Though we, too, enjoy the benefits of an interactive age, we must examine the comforts of virtual reality as well as the ethics of virtual reality. We must seek a balance.

In his theology for cyberspace, Gilder is prophesying nothing less than the move from narrowcast to broadcast, where the populace is free to tailor and alter the information it wants on demand with the push of a button from a smorgasbord of information services. We move from a top-down passive information chain to one that is bottom-up and that engenders active participation. Gilder promotes the economics of cyberspace at the expense of the aesthetics of cyberspace.

In place of centralized bureaucracies, such as governments, churches, schools, television, and the way we have processed information for several centuries, we see the emergence of decentralized institutions, epitomized by the computer network and the Information Superhighway. In theory, this decentralization should result in greater individual freedom and more abundance as well as variety in our entertainment and information options. But at what cost to the social fabric of our community?

Gilder's prescient observation on our coming high-tech

¹² Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Bantam, 1970). Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text. Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium Is the Message* (New York: Bantam, 1967).

future, notwithstanding, begs the question: As we come to be dominated by the tyranny of the icon, will there any longer be a need to read and think, and, thereby, promote the traditional wealth of a nation? Will there be an economic incentive to maintain quality public education? Who will be able to own a book? Will there come a day when we can no longer imagine a world without electronic texts, when it will be hard to imagine a time when people spent an evening with a hardback book on their lap and a cool refreshing glass of lemonade on the table, or relaxed in a comfortable spot in the great outdoors?

Will we see the emergence of information hierarchies and the concentration of information in the hands of a few information barons? Will one segment of the populace be designated for mass culture with its appeal to the prurient (broadcast TV) and the other for high culture with its appeal to the élite (narrow cast and the Information Superhighway)?

The electronic genie is out of the bottle. We are witnessing the domestication of reality (masked by the rhetoric of freedom and marked by a strong appeal to individual liberty), of verifiable existence. The artificial and spurious will replace the genuine and authentic. Seduced into an appealing electronic lotus land, people will need—indeed, demand—their daily fix. Virtual reality is defined as simulated existence achieved by computer-generated visual and auditory sensations, such as the *virtual reality* of landing a plane while seated in one's own easy chair or of building one of the great pyramids of Egypt. Virtual reality as episteme (which has always been a salient feature of mind-altering drugs) will ultimately influence how we construct knowledge and how we frame meaning and inscribe value. In his commentary on "the new nanosecond culture," Jeremy Rifkin observes that "computer learning—with its reliance on simulated nature, electronic birds and flowers rather than the real thing—is beginning to precede experi-

ential learning and is becoming a substitute for it.”¹³

Ruthe T. Sheffey, who has acted as friend and mentor for many of us in CLA, reminds us that “the Black college has always provided a model for the democratization of education for the oppressed, the poor, and the disinherited—a model that could very well serve and instruct [the academy in its rendezvous with America’s High-Tech future].” The observations of this senior scholar in regard to the democratization of technology and its humanistic implication derive in part as much from race as from history. The nation can ill-afford to continue its practice of squandering its human resources. The HBCU’s must be plugged into the future if the United States is to maintain its leadership as the “Temple of Technology.”¹⁴

The electronic stakes are high. If we fail a generation of youth, especially minority youth, we run the risk of producing another generation of Uncle Tom’s children: angry, alienated, disillusioned, and desperate. They will be enslaved in the darkest midnight of an impersonal technological apartheid. This will be the ultimate drive-by shooting on the Information Superhighway. A century after *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), one cannot help but wonder whether or not we will travel on the Information Superhighway “separate but equal.”¹⁵ A strange paradox emerges in the era of the declining significance of race: we see the onset of cyber-

¹³ Jeremy Rifkin, *Time Wars: The Primary Conflict in Human History* (New York: Touchstone, 1987) 34. In his controversial polemic, Rifkin argues that “slow is beautiful.” He envisions a culture emancipated from the tyranny of digital watches, cellular phones, and computers.

¹⁴ Ruthe T. Sheffey, *Trajectory: Fueling the Future and Preserving the African-American Past* (Baltimore: Morgan State UP, 1989) 103-09.

¹⁵ In a landmark decision, the United States Supreme Court held that under the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, a state could provide “separate but equal” facilities for African Americans. This case served as justification for the segregation policies of many states until overruled in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, KS*, in 1954. See John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, 7th ed. (1967; New York: McGraw Hill, 1994) 262, 411.

ethnocentricism and electronic redlining.

Briefly, I want to draw your attention to the nineteenth-century escaped slave *cum*-humanist, Frederick Douglass (1818-1895). He navigated intrepidly on the Information Superhighway of his day, the printing press. Douglass took to heart the admonition that we must “capture the technology” and not let it capture us. He resisted the domestication of reality. From his humble birth as a slave on the eastern shore of Maryland, Douglass rose to become the foremost African American of the nineteenth century. Brilliant and to a large degree self-taught, Douglass enjoyed a very rich and rewarding life: abolitionist orator, newspaper editor, social reformer, race leader, male feminist, diplomat, and Republican party advocate.

In “Triumphs and Trials” in the *Second Part of Life and Times*, Douglass describes the reception he received from his Abolitionist friends when he announced that he would publish his own newspaper, *The North Star* (1847-1851), and enter the marketplace of ideas. There was a great hue and cry from his supporters, the good people. They went to great lengths to describe the uncertainty and chaos that lay in front of him should he elect to navigate in cyberspace on his own and become his own agent, that is, edit his own newspaper. To the competitive threat which this ex-slave posed to their information enterprise, they remained coolly silent.¹⁶

As entrepreneur, Douglass assumed the risks for his successes or failures and reaped the rewards of his hard-won labors. Moreover, Douglass used technology for liberation, to open up the discourse—to speak for himself and his com-

¹⁶ Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1892; New York: Macmillan, 1962) 259-64. Douglass served as editor and publisher of *Frederick Douglass' Paper* (1851-1859), the *Douglass' Monthly* (1859-1863), and the *New National Era* (1870-1873). Also, see Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (U of North Carolina P, 1984) 58, and William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: Norton, 1991) 146-42.

munity.¹⁷ He was not terrorized by driving on the Information Superhighway of his day. And his driving, his voice, made a difference. The reality of his former life as a slave was more real to him than anything he could experience reading from the pages of a gothic romance.

From Douglass we learn that we must dare to critique the construction and consequences of the Information Superhighway. Information is not value neutral. We must subpoena virtual reality—its ethics, its suppositions, its values—to appear before the seat of reason. The penalty is simply more than an issue of guilt or innocence. Having sat virtual reality before the seat of reason, we must be concerned with how well we construct vibrant communities in an ethnically diverse world. We must practice liberating aesthetics to advance the cause of social justice and human dignity. Like Douglass, we must recognize the ideological struggle to domesticate “reality” by the information barons. In a variation on the ancient Platonic caveat that too much protest from men and women of literature might topple the state, the information barons are fearful lest a few good humanists disturb their techno-pastoral.

Accordingly, we must teach our students to read the texts, that is, the narratology of technology. We must teach them that the electronic age has its own philosophy, its own concepts, ideas, and practices. They must not become satisfied with being mere technicians and troubleshooters; they must know that “the pathway from slavery to freedom”¹⁸ takes them toward higher conceptual levels of community. Conversely, they must know that the road to virtual hell is

¹⁷ A cornerstone of African-American life, the black press traces its roots to 1827, when the Jamaican-American John Brown Russwurm (1799-1851) and Samuel E. Cornish (1795-1858) found *Freedom's Journal*, black America's first newspaper. Other influential figures in the black press include Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911), who was intimately involved with the Afro-Protestant Press; Ida Bell Wells-Barnett (1862-1931); T. Thomas Fortune (1856-1928); Marcus Mosiah Garvey (1887-1940); and George Samuel Schuyler (1895-1977).

¹⁸ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845; Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1960) 59.

paved with men and women of good intentions.

The last days of print culture will present us with upheaval and dislocation. Like other paradigm shifts in human history, the Information Age will encounter its fair share of turbulence. Human history celebrates the strength of the human spirit to resist its domestication which is prophesied by those who promise us a virtual field of dreams, for the Bible warns: "And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet" (Matt. 24:6, RSV).

Narratives of imminent destruction have not dimmed the vitality of the human spirit. The *telos* of print culture, meaning its end (in many areas), will energize and transform the virtual world. With a creative ferocity, the passionate defenders of print culture will use it to probe the virtual-based visual medium for its message. These voices of prophecy will extrapolate new meanings from the rising eminence of a visual-based culture.¹⁹

Finally, let us look at the humanist as Chief Executive Officer. This is not as strange as you think. A virtual revolution is taking place in the organizational structure of the academy, the last plantation. As we move from a vertical to a horizontal hierarchy, the power relationships and relationships of power in an academic new world order are being redefined (Toffler 137). The hot currency will be intellectual property and its commodification. The electronic links—hypertext—will decenter hierarchy and empower us. For that, we are all thankful. The advanced technologies will enable the teacher to bypass institutional hierarchies. With the advent of desktop publishing and multimedia

¹⁹ Nancy S. Thompson, "[Marshall] McLuhan's Expanded Language: Bringing the Language of the Global Village into the Classroom," NCTE Convention, Orlando, FL, November 20, 1994. Also, see Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1962) and *City as Classroom: Understanding Language and Media*, with Eric McLuhan and Kathryn Hutchon (Toronto: Book Society of Canada, 1977); and Richard A. Lanham, *The Electronic Word* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993).

(e.g., CD-Rom and Hypertext), it is much easier to exert greater control over the means of production. The emergence of new commercial technologies will add more flexibility to one's creative repertoire. All will serve to stimulate creativity and productivity at infinite distances.²⁰

The new technologies will also enable the academy to redefine its relationship with its employees, from faculty and librarians to support-staff. We will see the emergence of a two-tier employment system with a small faculty supported by adjuncts and other technocrats. As humanists we must ask: How do we fit into the equation of technological transfer? Is this a zero-sum game? As humanists, we need to look at the aesthetics as well as the economics of cyberspace.

The new reality calculus means that technology will displace some workers and therefore result in the promotion of more collaboration and innovation. This will bring about a realignment of administrators, faculty, and librarians. The virtual university is upon us. It will be a menu-driven, customer-friendly environment, from the electronic campus kiosk and debit card to teleconferencing and distance learning. With the click of a mouse, students can have access to the best minds in the world. We must adapt to the virtual curriculum or find ourselves in the unenviable position of being the twenty-first century equivalent of the dinosaur.

In the charged political landscape of the global village where market forces are being brought to bear upon the groves of academe, technology will challenge us to rethink our roles. Humanists in the virtual university will enter into

²⁰ George P. Landow, *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992). Also, see Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1983): 34; Patricia A. Sullivan and Donna J. Qualley, eds., *Pedagogy in the Age of Politics: Writing and Reading*, in *Academy* (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1994); and Cynthia L. Selfe and Susan Hilligoss, eds., *Literacy and Computers: The Complications of Teaching and Learning with Technology* (New York: MLA, 1994).

a new covenant, a new partnership. The teacher in the new world academy must be aware of the entrepreneurship within the heart of the academy to be “successful, adaptable, mobile, resourceful” (Toffler 148-49). The teacher must come to view him- or herself as an individual entrepreneur who is selling his or her knowledge and skill. Desktop publishing will afford us greater flexibility, creativity, artistic control, portability, and ease of production. The on-line classroom and distance learning will bring into sharper focus the relation of the academy as hardware and the teacher with his or her intellectual production as software.

Technology provides those with tenure a base of independence as well as the authority to be risk takers, to employ their skills and creative energies to solve problems and enter creative ventures provided by the organization. This practice has enabled generations of scholars to achieve both organization and self-fulfillment. Alas, for many, it may become a thing of the past.

In many respects, the political basis for the World Wide Web (and many of the commercial information technologies) signals that capital no longer needs an army of blue- and pink-collar workers. To serve their needs, the information entrepreneurs will require only electronic technocrats. This dynamic fuels the political pressure to redefine tenure as we know it. The ease of production will cause a realignment in the way things are produced and in the way information is dispersed. The net result will be an academy that is lean and lithe, capable of delivery on demand in a highly competitive global marketplace. Hence, we will see more turf wars over human resources, proprietary interests, and intellectual property. Nobody told us humanists the electronic millennium would be like this.

As we enter this brave new techno-world, we must be careful that it does not descend into a fine specimen of a particular kind of moral betrayal—one that promotes ethical invisibility. Temptation will be great for the privileged few: politicians, corporate executives, and, indeed, some in-

tellelectuals. Though they may preach democracy (read: access and equity) and live within its shelter, they will find it difficult to surrender their rank and privilege. We learned from Douglass, as humanist and CEO, that we can put a human face on technology. The profit motive and social responsibility need not always be antagonistic foes. Oh! If Chaucer's Oxford Scholar could only see us now.

A child's nursery rhyme points the way from the safe harbor of empty platitudes toward the higher concepts of community:

Hey diddle, diddle
The cat and the fiddle
The cow jumped over the moon
The little dog laughed to see such a sport
The dish ran away with the spoon.

Within the cultural logic of this meditation on wanderlust, the moon is the launching pad for the creation of an alternative option for those people, who, in Ellisonian terms, are trapped outside of history. The internal drama and the relevance of this nursery rhyme for the humanist is that it speaks to the humanist in a world where values are portable, perishable, and packaged to seduce. Drawing on all of her resources, the cow, emblematic of the human spirit, resists man-made structures, such as the domestication of reality. At heart, the electronic age is an attack on our subjectivity.

Rather than remain earthbound, docilely behind the fence, being a receptor for other people's representations of reality, we need to teach our students to move from their earthbound position, a prescription for their being roadkilled on the Information Superhighway, and go in search of new worlds to conquer. They should be actors as well as reactors—voyagers, not merely voyeurs.

Frederick Douglass resisted other people's definition of himself. He navigated intrepidly on a nineteenth-century version of the Internet. Likewise, we must encourage our students to embark on the creation of an-*other* way of see-

ing which is socially relevant and has the improvement of the quality of life for all as its endpoint. Douglass exhibited the high courage that was necessary to travel on an unknown road, especially outside the slave community, outside the "hood," to and beyond the moon.

He went from imaging freedom to living as a freeman, redefining freedom. He refused to be consigned to a world of technological apartheid where he quietly permitted others to fleece him of his dignity, human potential, and intellectual capital. He traveled in cyberspace as a consumer and as a producer. He converted information into knowledge in order to critique and condemn a system that wrote him out of history. Douglass used technology to enhance the total learning experience.

Tennyson's Ulysses said, "'Tis not too late to seek a newer world."²¹ I say it is not too late to make the Information Superhighway user-friendly, if by user-friendly we mean access and equity. As we enter the age of cyberspace, where are we going, CLA? Over or to the moon? Our navigation of cyberspace and what we teach our students about the humanistic implication of life's great adventure in a digital universe will be of utmost importance as they enter "a millennial transformation of society" (Birkets 5). The Information Superhighway is the passport to the electronic future. The wealth of nations depends on how well we teach our students to drive on the Information Superhighway and take their rightful place in a dynamic future.

We must demystify its grammar and conjugate its promise. That is our calling. To demystify the future means that we must bring into focus the social relations of production on the one hand and state power on the other. To conjugate its promise means that we must develop a profoundly humanistic vision of life. The Interactive Age represents humanity's creative confrontation with reality. The aesthetics

²¹ Alfred Lord Tennyson, "Ulysses," *Poetry*, ed. Robert W. Hill, Jr. (New York: Norton, 1971) 52-54.

of recognition is at work when we enter into a creative partnership with our students to grasp an idea, understand how a principle operates, or how a solution was found. In the process, we penetrate and expose the mystifications of ideology and recognize alienation in all of its forms. We thus provide our students with a syntax for opportunity. With their expanded language, they will be in a position to probe their environment for the meaning of its message(s). As we move from a text-based to a visual-based society—the electronic screen, Internet, World Wide-Web—we virtual humanists must write the technology and not let the technology write us. The stakes are high. If we fail, the alternative for many in our underserved communities is to “go pick cotton.”

*The University of Georgia
Athens, Georgia*

Author's note: This article is dedicated to the memory of Richard K. Barksdale, who delivered his CLA Presidential Address in New Orleans on April 10, 1975, at the association's Thirty-Fifth Annual Convention (*CLAJ* 18.4). I wish to thank Erica L. Griffin, my graduate research associate, who located many of my sources and compiled a short bibliography.